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ABSTRACT

As part of a cross-national research project on literature instruction in middle-grade classrooms in Great Britain and the United States this study explored the effects of external assessment on that instruction. The focus was on the literature selected, the class time allotted, and provisions made for students' choices. The study explored the teaching of four language arts teachers in a middle school and junior high school in the south central United States and two secondary schools in the southwest of England. The English classes had 28 and 31 students respectively, and the U.S. classes each had 27 students. Data sources included observations of instruction, weekly interviews with teachers and students, interviews with auxiliary personnel, examination of official policy documents, and personal reflections of the researcher in journal form. In the United Kingdom, the National Curriculum provides for the teaching of a standard curriculum, and a national assessment, the Standard Assessment Tasks, is taken by students at key educational stages. Assessment on a national scale is not a feature of American schools, but both study schools were in Texas, where students take the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills as part of the state testing program. In England, the National Curriculum had a strong influence on teachers' practice, and the external assessment both drove much of the curriculum and worked against student choice in reading selections. External assessment had little effect on the choice of literature studied in the Texas schools, and student choice was considered by one teacher and not the other. Results suggest that external assessment has an impact on instruction, and that the higher the stakes, or more distant the level of assessment, the greater the influence. External assessment does not appear to coexist comfortably with student choice of literature. (Contains 1 figure and 14 references.) (SLD)

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Literature Instruction and Assessment: A Cross-National Study

Based on

PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE INSTRUCTION FOR EARLY ADOLESCENTS IN SELECTED SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND THE UNITED STATES

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Literature Instruction and Assessment: A Cross-National Study

English language arts lies at the heart of school academic programs, and literature is a central component of those arts although there exists considerable disharmony as to what the English language arts should include and what their purpose should be. Amid this lack of consensus are calls for reform in education, a moving towards the establishing of standards in subject areas, and the possibility of a nationally mandated curriculum. Assessment on a national scale may become a reality in the United States as it has overseas.

As part of a cross-national research project on literature instruction in selected middle-grade classrooms in Great Britain and the United States, this paper examines the effects of external assessment on that instruction. Specifically, I explore the influence of external assessment on the following aspects of instruction: (a) literature selected, (b) class time allotted, and (c) provisions for students' choice.

Theoretical Framework

Several scholars in the United States have noted the importance of selecting appropriate literature for early adolescents (Applebee, 1990; Atwell, 1987; Nelms, 1988; Probst, 1988), while the Carnegie Council (1989) warned that a "volatile mismatch " exists between the intellectual and emotional needs of these students and present educational programs.

Concurrently, federal reform initiatives are committed to the belief that high national goals geared to performance on examinations are necessary for improvement in the American education system (Simmons & Resnick, 1993). Claims are made that "by the year 2000, students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter" (Campbell, 1992). However, federal funding was withdrawn from the English Language Arts Standards group in 1994 with criticisms that their

proposals failed to "define what students should know and be able to do in the domains of language, literacy, and literacy" (Diegmueller, 1994).

In Great Britain, a move to raise standards in schools led to the Education Reform Act (1988) which created a National Curriculum and also established national assessment in core subjects, including English. Currently British 14-year olds take two English examinations, one a literature test, which is an essay question on selected passages from a prescribed Shakespeare play.

However, the impact of national assessment on classroom practice has raised some concerns. Cross-national studies in the field of writing between schools in the San Francisco Bay area and the greater London area (Freedman, 1994) report the negative impact of the national examinations. Freedman found her observations in examination-year classrooms in Britain "depressing"; the approaching General Certificate of Secondary Education exams colored all phases of classroom practice. Such cross-national studies can serve a useful purpose, informing American educators faced with similar prospects.

Methods

The Settings and Participants

This cross-national study was ethnographic in its design and embraced a naturalistic stance (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). It explored the practice of four English/language arts teachers in different schools, two in the south central United States of America and two in the southwest of England. The school populations varied in socioeconomic levels but not in ethnicity, being predominantly anglo. Although one school in each country was in a rural setting and one urban, the national differences in size of metropolitan areas were sufficiently marked that the schools were not matched according to regional location. The students in the study ranged in age from 12 to 14. In the United Kingdom, these students attended secondary schools for students aged 11 to 16, while of the American schools one was a junior high school and the other a middle school. In each school, I focused on the participating

teacher's instruction to one class. I created a case study of each of the four classrooms using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines.

Schools in the United Kingdom. Mr. Fawcett taught at Covington School, the main secondary school for a coastal area in the southwest of England. The school served 595 pupils, aged 11 to 16 in Years 7 to 11. Fewer than 1% of the pupils came from ethnic minority backgrounds, and none from homes where English was not the first language. The teacher confirmed that the socioeconomic level in the area reflected "very little conspicuous wealth." The focus class was Mr. Fawcett's heterogeneous group of Year 9 pupils in the last year of key stage 3, children who were approaching their fourteenth birthday. There were 28 students in the class, 16 girls and 12 boys, most of whom had never lived outside the area. English instruction was scheduled for three weekly periods of an hour each on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The Friday hour alternated between a library visit and a drama session.

Portsmith, one of three schools (two state-supported and one private) that served the area of Torbryn catered to children in the 11 to 16 age range. with an enrollment of 1008. Portsmith students came from a range of socioeconomic levels, but were ethnically homogenous since there was little movement of people of other ethnicities into the area, and the enrollment was predominantly local. Ms. Davis Year 9 class totaled 31 students, 19 girls and 12 boys and were a "higher set" although Ms. Davis did not believe her students were exceptional in terms of this particular school. Within the English department, students were taught in heterogeneous "form groups" during the entry level, Year 7. Beginning in Year 8, two higher sets and six "foundation" sets were formed from the eight groups. Ms. Davis' Year 9 class had English for 50 minutes on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.

Schools in the United States. In an area which was rapidly changing from its early rural beginnings, Latimer lay 24 miles from Addison, a large metropolitan city. Latimer Junior High School, serving twelve to fourteen-year-olds in the seventh and eighth grades had an enrollment of 1200, with a student population of approximately 83% white, 15% Mexican American, 2% black. The assistant principal explained the school's eclectic population: "Some students come from homes valued at $500,000. On the other end of

the scale we suspect there are students who are raising themselves, possibly living in cars."

Ms. Gill's fourth period English class met every day at 12:40 for 45 minutes. This was one of two sections considered "enriched," although not officially so. The placement of these students happened as a result of their taking an honors math (algebra) course. There were 27 students in the class; one child was an African-American, and one was Hispanic. Ms. Gill did not feel her students were typical of the socioeconomic level of the school, which the principal had termed "light blue."

Westlyn Middle School served a middle to upper middle-class population, with a current enrollment of 800 students aged 11 to 14 in grades six through eight. The population was predominantly white, with less than 10% of the students being of other ethnicities. Ms. McDonald taught seventh grade exclusively; classes consisted of 90 minute daily sessions. The class I observed was an honors group of 27 students, 17 girls and 10 boys.

Data and Data Collection

Data sources included the following:

- Observations of instruction, audiotaped and recorded as field notes
- Weekly interviews with teachers and students
- Interviews with auxiliary school personnel
- Examination of official policy documents
- Personal reflections in journal form

During a six-month period, I visited each site for three observational periods of one week, totaling 12 weeks of data collection (see figure 1).

Date	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
Feb. 6-10	Portsmith	Portsmith		Portsmith	Portsmith
13-17	Covington		Covington		Covington
20-24					
Mar 27-3					
6-10	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer
13-17	Covington		Covington		Covington
20-24	Portsmith	Portsmith		Portsmith	Portsmith
27-31					
Apr. 3-7	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer
10-14					
17-21		Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn
24-28		Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn
May 1-5	Westlyn	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer	Latimer
8-12	Latimer				
15-19	Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn	Westlyn
22-26		Westlyn			
June 29-2					
5-9					
12-16	Portsmith	Portsmith		Portsmith	Portsmith
19-23	Covington		Covington		Covington

Figure 1. Schedule of visits to the four schools

Classroom Observations. I observed every class meeting during each of three weeks, arriving before the class began to set up my audiotape equipment and to talk briefly to the teacher about any changes in the schedule. I audiotaped each lesson and used a field microphone to cover the whole classroom. After initial interest in the microphone, some blowing and whispering "Is it on, Miss?" the students quickly ignored the equipment. As a supplement to the audiotapes, I took field notes in order to record nonverbal

activity: teacher movement, writing on the chalkboard, hands raising, and other student behavior. I also noted questions I had during instruction, matters to clarify with the teacher. Typically I sat quietly at the side or back of the room. However, when the students were writing or working in small groups, I left my seat to observe them more closely. If the students worked in other areas, out of doors or in different rooms, I circulated, dividing my time among them.

Teacher Interviews. During each week I conducted a formal interview with the teacher. I scheduled it as close to the end of the weekly observational period as possible to allow for questions which arose during my stay. The interviews, lasting 40 minutes to one hour, took place during free periods and occasionally over lunch. For each interview, I prepared a format to guide the discussion. The three interviews, taken together, were intended to provide a holistic picture of the teacher's practice. In designing the interviews I drew upon the questionnaires of Applebee (1990), Protherough and Atkinson (1992), and my own classroom pilot studies with middle-school teachers. The interview formats were intended to guide discussion, not restrict it. However, as the present focus is on assessment, I present information relevant only to this topic.

Auxiliary Personnel Interviews. At each school I interviewed additional personnel. I made no prior selections, relying instead on recommendations of the teachers at each site, my own interpretations during data collection, and the availability of the personnel. I spoke with those personnel who could increase my understanding of literature instruction and assessment at their school. Thus the interviewees differed at each site; I met with head teachers, an assistant principal, heads of the English department, and other teachers of literature or reading.

Official Policy Statements. I examined official policy documents relevant to assessment and English/language arts instruction, either obtaining photocopies, or, in the case of school handbooks, being given copies. In the United Kingdom, my main focus was on the Kingman Report (1988), the National Curriculum (1990) and the more recent revisions, including Sir Ron Dearing's English in the National Curriculum (1995). In

the United States the relevant documents consisted of state or school district guidelines, and, in the case of Westlyn Middle School, the school booklists.

Reflective Journal. Throughout the study I maintained a journal which accompanied data collection. Each dated entry was a narrative which served as a personal and cognitive record during the project. It was a travel log, a reservoir of all my impressions, a venue for problem recognition and problem solving. It was where I recorded unsatisfactory events and thought through how to improve them. It stored questions and ideas as I mulled them over and reformulated them to point to future directions.

Data Analysis

Data were derived from multiple sources. Field notes and audiotapes of observations gave rise to my perspective of what happened in the classroom. Interviews and follow-up conversations helped to reveal the teacher's perspective. Marshall and Rossman (1989) explain:

> Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion: it is not neat. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data; it builds grounded theory. (p. 112)

As is typical for qualitative analysis, I examined immediately and continuously data collected at each observation and interview to ensure my understanding. In addition, daily analysis raised questions that guided the continuing process. As I interviewed the teachers, I learned answers to the following questions:

1. What literature does the teacher include? Why?
2. What guides the teacher's instruction?
   - What is his/her belief system about literature instruction?
   - What are the goals for the students?
   - What external controls influence the teaching?
   - What other constraints play a part?

From the interviews, I was able to identify how external assessment influenced classroom practice

As I examined aspects of teaching literature, categories emerged to impose organization on the data and allow me to look at each case through the same categorical lens. Assessment was one of the six categories that emerged The other categories included the following:

(1) classroom environment which was further divided into four components: the *physical*, the *group*, the *work*, and the *psycho-social* aspects (Glatthorn, 1991);
(2) subject matter;
(3) methods;
(4) opportunities for response to literature;
(5) motivation to read.

Because assessment was embedded in the ongoing life of the classroom, it was not possible to divorce it from the five other categories. As I analyzed the data I looked at assessment as it pertained to the four case studies. I presented similarities and differences among them, drawing on my observations, interviews with teachers, and my examination of official documents.

Results

Before I could gauge its impact, an important first step was to understand the nature of external assessment as it applied to the classrooms I was studying. The following information is relevant to this project and the sites in question.

Assessment in the United Kingdom.

With the passing of the Education Reform Act (1988) the National Curriculum was created. It represented an attempt to set specific guidelines for raising standards in schools. In a short but stormy history, the National Curriculum evolved to its current version which came into effect September 1995, a result of collaborative work under Sir Ron Dearing. After giving general guidelines on the nature and purpose of literature in the classroom,

the document presents the following specifics for a literature curriculum in key stages 3 and 4:

- two plays by Shakespeare;
- two works of fiction by writers published before 1900 [e.g., works drawn from a list);
- two works of fiction by writers published after 1900 [drawn from a list of suggestions];
- poems by four major poets whose works were published before 1900 [drawn from a list of suggestions];
- poems by four major poets whose works were published after 1900 [drawn from a list of suggestions].

This document, although simplified in comparison to the earlier English in the National Curriculum (1990), was more prescriptive. The earlier guidelines had urged a range of genre and the study of pre-twentieth century literature and contemporary writing rather than being genre specific

Pupils in Great Britain are assessed by national examinations at the end of key stages (ages 7, 11, 14, and 16). The Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) administered in May at the end of Key Stage 3 consist of two examination papers in English. Paper 1 had three sections involving personal interpretation and response to (a) fiction, (b) nonfiction, and (c) a creative essay. Paper 2, a 75-minute essay exam, asked students to answer one of two options on one of three prescribed Shakespeare plays. The following prompts were the tasks on Romeo and Juliet in the 1994 examination:

> Act 1 Scene 5, Lines 1 - 157
>
> There is a sense of excitement and romance in this scene, but also an undercurrent of danger.
>
> Where and how are these moods of excitement, romance, and danger created during the scene? How do they affect the audience's feelings about Romeo and Juliet at this point in the play?

Act 5 Scene 3, Lines 1 - 170

In this scene there are many moments of drama. Choose some of these and show how the tension and excitement build up to the tragic climax of Juliet's death.

In the United Kingdom there is no county assessment which would correspond to the system of state assessment in American schools.

Assessment in Schools in the United States.

Assessment on a national scale is not a feature of schools in the United States where discussions of core curriculum have been more descriptive than prescriptive. Nor has there been mandatory testing of literature, national or state at the middle-school level. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has consistently opposed a national curriculum. Its recent development of standards for the English language arts was based on a conviction that professional associations were best qualified to respond to a federal initiative.

The American schools in the study were in Texas where the state guidelines influencing K-12 English education were the Essential Elements and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), both implemented by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The Essential Elements enumerate the concepts and skills which students at each grade level are expected to master in every subject. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was designed to measure problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills across a broad range of the state-mandated essential elements of curriculum. Each spring reading and mathematics are tested at grades three through eight and at exit level (prior to high school graduation). Writing is tested at grades four, eight and exit level. Assessment in reading comprehension at grade seven is a timed multiple-choice test of 40 items on several reading passages to determine a passage's main idea, setting, or purpose. The test items also focus on prediction, inferential thinking, vocabulary, and the ability to read a graph or table. The TAAS does not assess students' interpretation of specific literary selections read prior to testing.

Thus major differences existed between the British and American schools in the area of assessment. These include the nature of the examining body: national assessment in Britain, state assessment in the Texas schools; content: literature specific in Britain (although both countries assessed students' interpretation of previously unseen passages); and form of testing: short answer and essay responses in the United Kingdom, an exclusively multiple choice format in Texas.

The Influence of External Assessment

In this article I examine the possible impact of external assessment on classroom practice in two British and two American classrooms. Data derive from my observations, interviews and examination of documents. Specifically I have chosen to focus on three ways in which the influence of assessment can be felt: on literature selected, on time allotted, and on provision for students' choice in reading. However, these were not the only relevant findings. I include other observations as additional comments in the Discussion.

External Assessment and Literary Selections. In the two British schools, literature selected for instruction form September to May followed the guidelines laid down by the National Curriculum. At Covington School Mr. Fawcett began the year with a poetry unit, including some 19th century English poetry by Wordsworth and some American works by Robert Frost. These satisfied the guidelines for "pre-twentieth century literature," "literature from different countries," and influential works in the English language. The diary reading and writing that followed exposed the students to "a variety of genre." Mr. Fawcett explained that the class first read diaries of two explorers to the South Pole. Then students, in pairs chose a remote terrain to research. Having collected information, the students individually wrote their own diary of exploration across the terrain chosen. Next the class read a modern play Terraces by Willy Russell which involved a discussion on conformity. It also satisfied the requirement of contemporary writing.

From the three Shakespeare plays offered in the National Curriculum (Julius Caesar, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Romeo and Juliet, Mr. Fawcett selected the latter. The class studied selected scenes in detail and

acquired a general knowledge of the play as a whole. To accompany and parallel the play reading, Mr. Fawcett showed the Zeffirelli film version of Romeo and Juliet. After the SATs and for the remainder of the school year, the class undertook a dramatic debate inquiry based on a simulated occurrence, "Cloud over Hanford." Mr. Fawcett selected this unit from a collection of drama projects for the classroom. The topic was the appearance of a mysterious cloud over a country village and the ensuing debate as to what it was, who was responsible, and the possible damage it caused. The students studied simulated news accounts, adopted roles to debate the issue, held a town meeting and videotaped their proceedings. In the accompanying writing assignments, students constructed interview questions for a news conference and wrote persuasive pieces in the role of the characters adopted.

Ms. Davis at Portsmith School began the year with the Shakespeare play, Romeo and Juliet. For three weeks in January the class read the novel Walkabout, a story of cultural interaction in the Australian outback. This novel satisfied the National Curriculum guidelines for contemporary literature. However it also represented one of the six thematic schemes of work, "Wider Horizons," that the Portsmith English department was developing. Ms. Davis also introduced a poetry study, first with selections of Wordsworth, followed by the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas. After this introduction, the students selected and studied poetry of their choice, and the unit concluded with the compilation of individual anthologies. The class returned to Romeo and Juliet for a pre SATs review.

Following the examinations students undertook an innovative media study of soap opera where students explored the genre then in small groups they created their own soap operas. Each group chose the final form for the drama, a video, a tape recording, a live performance. Groups then chose their audience; they were responsible for presenting their soap and obtaining feedback from the audience. The year's culminating unit for this class was an investigation into point of view, persuasion and propaganda using newspapers.

Much instruction in these classrooms before the May national examinations focused on prescribed genre, fiction and nonfiction and particularly on scenes from Romeo and Juliet, the play selected. In the study

of the play, lessons involved close textual reading, dramatic interpretation, practice essay writing, and film viewing. However, after the May assessment there was an explosion of innovative practice which gave students more control of instruction, practice which involved debates, media study, collaborative drama writing. Additionally, while the teachers in both classes incorporated nonliterary texts, the curriculum still satisfied the National Curriculum guidelines.

The two American schools differed from their British counterparts and from each other. In neither American classroom did external assessment dictate curriculum as far as classroom reading. Factors that influenced literary selections in these schools tended to be economic, the textbook selected or assigned, or school policy where booklists guided teachers' choices at each grade level.

However, at Latimer Junior High School, the teacher claimed assessment did drive practice. Here, Ms. Gill understood her responsibility to be teaching writing skills in order to produce high scores on the state writing assessment. She did, however, chose topics and literary selections that she believed interested students, but she also practiced test writing in preparation for state and district assessment. At this site, language arts classes were distinct from "reading," the latter relegated to the reading teacher. In the reading class, students self-selected fiction and read for pleasure independently. They wrote brief responses to their chosen novels while the teacher guided them to expand their interests and conducted discussions of genre. Ms Gill had included a strand of independent reading at her previous position, but at Latimer she did not unpack the 350 paper-backed books which had been her classroom library. She taught a unit on folktales, a nonfiction exploration of social issues, The Diary of Anne Frank, and scenes from A Midsummer Night's Dream.

At Westlyn Middle School, where there was also no external assessment of literature, its impact, naturally, was nonexistent. In the spring these seventh graders took the state reading assessment, but this examination appeared to engender little interest and no practice. When I questioned Ms. McDonald about this procedure, she had to ask her colleague across the hall for the date and other details, admitting it did not influence her teaching.

While careful not to encroach on the reading lists of other grades, this teacher introduced a wide range of literature. The year's repertoire began with short stories, ranging from a children's version of Beowulf to "contemporary stories that I get out of magazines." Following the short stories, the class read Our Town, "an important play they don't get at any other grade." Three novels were Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, When the Legends Die and Animal Farm. Ms. McDonald also included, "Odyssey episodes turned into a story: The Children's Homer. an abridged, but not simplified, version of A Midsummer-Night's Dream, and nonfiction pieces."

In this class there were also two provisions for independent reading. One of these was ongoing recreational reading; students were responsible for selecting books of interest, reading regularly throughout the year, and keeping a record of their reading. Additionally Ms. McDonald included a unit on the classics. She presented book talks on a large number of literary works, then invited students to select one to read independently. The project ended in individual presentations to the class.

External Assessment and The Time Allotted to Literature Studied. I next examined how external assessment impacted regular instructional time. In the United Kingdom, the literature studied before May and afterwards satisfied the National Curriculum guidelines directly. However, the time allotted to the different selections varied in accordance to assessment demands. According to the National Curriculum, students were expected to read and respond to a range of genre and nonfiction, including pre twentieth century and contemporary works. These experiences helped prepare them for English, Paper 1. However, this examination did not presuppose knowledge of specific literature, unlike Paper Two. Both British schools spent many weeks of English instructional time on a study of the play in preparation for the essay exam.

At Covington School, the study of Romeo and Juliet began in late January and lasted nine weeks. As is typical in Britain, Covington School recessed for the three-week Easter break, so the Shakespeare unit proceeded until just before the May examinations. Instruction occupied the Monday and Wednesday hours of class time. It also took over the weekly period normally usually devoted to the library visit. For the most part, drama

continued on Friday afternoons and provided an occasion for students to role play and interpret sections of the play. After the examination, the teacher did not reintroduce the library visits, claiming "the habit had been broken." Other units in the Year 9 English class at Covington, the poetry, the diary reading and writing, and the contemporary literature occupied four weeks.

In the period between May and the end of the school year in July, collaborative units became the main feature in both British classroom and the instruction became more flexible. Then Mr. Fawcett and Ms. Davis allowed students much control in the use of time in English lessons. They set the pace, while the teachers provided guidance as needed, mainly reviewing the group's progress and supplying pointers to keep matters on track. Mr. Fawcett's students devoted the remaining weeks of the year to the "Cloud over Hanford." A relaxed informal atmosphere prevailed. Assessment did not play any part in instruction, and no grades were given.

At Portsmith, Ms. Davis spent longer on the Shakespeare play, the twelve weeks of the Autumn Term and a further period of revision in the spring. Time available for other study was thus January and February and the period between May and late July. The class spent three weeks on the novel Walkabout. Following the novel the poetry unit began. Because this became an independent project in the creation of the poetry anthologies, Ms. Davis allowed the students to conclude their compilations on their own time, handing in finished work at a later date. The Portsmith students spent the time after the SATs on two topics: the soap opera project and the newspaper study (points of view and propaganda). The students were not preparing for assessment, external or otherwise for that matter. Instructional time in the longer soap unit was spent according to the students' progress as they completed their group dramas. However, both topics did satisfy National Curriculum guidelines that emphasized student reading of a range of informational texts and media. At Portsmith, where independent reading had not occurred pre-examination, it became a classroom feature for the rest of the year. External assessment impacted classroom practice in the way instructional time was spent.

At Latimer Junior High school the preparation for and administration of state and district assessment necessitated several interruptions of regular

classroom instruction. When external assessment took place at Latimer, it was always scheduled during the morning. For the remaining hours of test days, the school went on an alternate timetable of abbreviated instructional periods. One week in the early spring was given over to state testing. Prior to the TAAS writing examination, Ms. Davis' eighth graders typically spent several days in preparation. The teacher presented varied essay prompts for students to consider independently. She then helped them to recognize the kind of writing called for (persuasive, expository, narrative), and suggested appropriate strategies for approaching each one. The other external assessment administered was the district Benchmark exams. These occurred twice a year, in the fall and the spring. Although the class did not spend instructional time in preparation as these were placement measures, daily schedules were shortened. During testing, normal instruction was suspended and a more informal mode prevailed in English lessons.

At Westlyn, preparation for the reading assessment involved a brief explanation of what testing procedures would involve. The test itself occupied one morning. External assessment did not intrude into instructional time; in fact, I never heard it mentioned.

The Influence Of External Assessment on Provisions For Students' Choice. Teachers in both countries acknowledged that an important aspect of literature instruction was to foster children's love of reading. Item 16 on the Programme of Study for Key stages 3 and 4 (1990) states the following guideline: "Teachers should encourage pupils to read in their own time and to discuss their favourite reading. Pupils should be helped to tackle texts of increasing difficulty." At Covington School, one of the three weekly English classes took a different format in the Autumn Term when it was devoted to either a library visit or a drama lesson. During the library visit students browsed and selected books of interest which they read independently. After completing their selections, students were responsible for responding to their reading, typically with a book report. No class time was given to independent reading or discussion of student choices. This practice was discontinued when the class began the Shakespeare play in January.

At Portsmith Ms. Davis emphasized that she wanted children to enjoy and pursue reading. She was guided in her choice of literature by whether

the students would find it interesting, claiming she "would not persevere with something they were not enjoying." A major focus of the poetry unit in February, was the creation of individual poetry anthologies. After reading and responding to 19th century and contemporary poetry, Ms. Davis discussed some of the students' options: they could focus on one poet, one theme in poetry, one form of verse, or explore regional poetry such as the Merseyside writers. Students read and responded to several poems, sometimes with illustrations. Some students write their own poetry. They then compiled the whole into an anthology. Within this clearly defined framework, the teacher allowed students choice while satisfying national Curriculum guidelines.

The media study which began at Portsmith in May after the SATs afforded the students greater flexibility and choice in two ways. The groups selected the theme for their dramas, composed their scripts, and made all the decisions related to production. During most of the lessons, student groups gathered in small computer labs or offices around the school. Second, while this unit was in progress, Ms. Davis brought in boxes of young adult fiction and invited the students to delve in and choose a book. These short novels were contemporary stories on social issues so they went along with the soap opera unit. Students read these novels at home not in school although group discussion and sharing was planned as a later culminating activity. Again guided choice meshed with curricular plans and allowed students some control of their reading both before and after the national examinations.

Again practice in the American schools, Latimer and Westlyn differed. External assessment had little direct impact on student choice although indirect influence was perhaps considerable. At Latimer where Ms. Gill understood her role as a teacher of writing skills, she selected reading selections from the textbook, in accordance with decisions of the interdisciplinary cohort, and based on her perceptions of what would interest the students. Ms. Gill allowed many choices albeit not of the material to be read. In her class students worked in small groups and made many decisions while she "facilitated." However self selection of reading was what happened in reading not in Ms. Gill's language arts class.

As there was no external assessment of literature for Westlyn students--either national, state, or district--and no pressure to maintain test scores, Ms. McDonald felt a significant degree of freedom in her teaching. She did not encroach on another grade's choices on the book lists; she also taught some of the same literature every year, based on current resources on hand in the book room. Nevertheless, student choice was built into the program. The seventh grade teachers had included independent reading, self-selected reading as one component of language arts. In addition, Ms McDonald provided the students with guided choice in their reading and presentation of the classics.

Discussion

The National Curriculum in the United Kingdom had a strong influence on the teachers' practice. It provided a guiding framework for selection of subject matter. One benefit, Mr. Fawcett admitted, was that it broadened the teacher's repertoire in suggesting literature which might not otherwise be included. Ms. Davis found its framework so broad that teachers had a wide choice in the literature they could bring to the classroom. However, with the revisions to the National Curriculum and meeting its changing guidelines would likely exhaust budget allowances in these schools for the foreseeable future and in this way limit choices.

Nevertheless where external assessment of literature existed, it appeared to drive much of the curriculum. It also worked directly against choice in reading. Because national assessment in the SAT Paper Two was devoted to one essay question, the two pre-selected scenes from the Shakespeare play received long, close scrutiny. Not surprisingly, the British teachers led their students through extremely close textual readings of the focal scenes, accompanied by film, drama, and written responses. Covington students spent nine weeks on Shakespeare, and Portsmith students spent even longer. Not that the students complained about their long Shakespeare study; they too thought it was important. Still, the Shakespeare study occupied time which could have been spent on other literature. Ms. McDonald's students read many more literary works than the British pupils.

Of course, the time allocated for English instruction varied greatly. Westlyn seventh graders had seven and a half hours weekly compared to three hours at Covington.

Where assessment was least intrusive for whatever reason, student choice had the most play. At Covington library visits were dropped. At Westlyn, however, independent reading was an ongoing component of English language arts. This was not the case at Latimer, despite Ms. Gill's previous teaching experience her three hundred paperback books remained in storage. Reading for pleasure happened in another class. Ms. Gill taught the literature in the textbook and was responsible for improving students' writing skills.

Lest one condemn "high stakes" national assessment out of hand, I must suggest other findings. In the British classrooms I visited, innovative student-centered practices were a part of regular instruction coexisting with national guidelines and the mandated curriculum. Students read and wrote a variety of texts. They used drama spontaneously and with evident enjoyment. Collaborative learning flourished. Overall the UK teachers focused on examination-related work for an intensive period and then returned to more student-oriented approaches. In doing so they exhibited a clear understanding of what is involved in delivering to the system what it wants but not giving over entirely to it throughout the rest of the year. They indicated that they could balance co-existing instructional foci and approaches.

While in the United Kingdom, I was reminded of George Washington's statement, "What is honored in a country will be cultivated there." The study of the Shakespeare play was undertaken with enthusiasm and respect. And this positive attitude was demonstrated by teachers ands students alike. Shakespeare is the well known bard, a cherished and valued giant in the national consciousness. Thus assessment was consistent with knowledge valued. In contrast, however, instructional time devoted to English each week was longer in both American classrooms than in the British schools.

A further observation is relevant. Off-setting the limiting effects on classroom practices of large-scale standardized assessment was the high

quality of student product, particularly in the British schools where outside examiners read the student papers. I studied samples of students' writing in all four classrooms. Because the students were not matched in age or level, it is difficult to generalize; however, the demanding essay questions on the SATs produced insightful, careful writing.

Although this article focused on external assessment and did not address assessment practices within the classroom, a marked contrast was evident. Internal classroom assessment in Britain was informal and infrequent compared to its equivalent in the two American classrooms. Numerical grades were never given. An occasional assessment "level" would be awarded in response to students' written work, but this practice did not appear to generate much concern. The typical response to written work was a short comment at the end of a paper. Communication with parents took the form of a brief, mid-year evaluation, one that commented on the student's progress or lack thereof, and an annual parents' night, an opportunity for conferencing with the teacher.

American students were grade-conscious in comparison, with the school year divided into six-week grading periods when report cards were sent home to parents. Ms. Gill collected a week's work every Friday, awarding grades to class work, quizzes, and homework. Ms. McDonald did not give many tests, but she did award frequent daily grades and numerical grades to written work. When I asked students how they were "getting along," British students replied with a polite "Very well, thank you." or less enthusiastically, "All right, I suppose"; American students responded with their grades, "Good. I'm getting all As."

Conclusion

Limitations of the Study

An unavoidable limitation of this kind of study is the sense that it is never really complete. There was so much to learn about the teachers and their practice that each item of information I received raised more questions. Several follow-up conversations with the teachers took place, and I conclude my inquiry with the understanding that there is much more to discover.

Further cross-national studies would be valuable for comparison purposes, and in overcome some of the limitations in this study. A major limitation was that it was brief and based on a small number of participants. A longer time in each site would yield richer data. Future studies might select participants from different ethnicities, regions, and kinds of schools. Another limitation of this study could well be that middle schools in Texas and the state's assessment program may be atypical of those in other states.

Implications

Undoubtedly, external assessment impacts instruction, and it appears that the higher the stakes or more distant the level the greater the influence. However, this appears to be a more complex issue affording advantages as well as disadvantages. A National Curriculum on which assessment is based can offer a broad enough framework that it does not limit teachers in their choice of literary selections; instead it stretches their repertoire to include genre and forms of nonfiction which they might otherwise include. Certainly, preparing for the challenging examination can prompt students to write well

What then, we might ask, is the purpose of literature instruction in schools? This study demonstrates that external assessment of literature does not comfortably coexist with wide reading, choice in reading, collaborative sharing of literature, or independent reading. If our hope is to motivate our students to read and to encourage lifelong reading, then we must recognize that external assessment, whatever its benefits, works against that goal. As the United States continues to approach curriculum reform and national standards in core subjects, the British experience can offer some revealing insights.

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